

THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE HERALD OF FREE ENTERPRISE
DISASTER 6TH MARCH 2017 in ST MARY'S CHURCH DOVER

Bishop James Jones

Check against delivery

For eight years as a boy I lived on the White Cliffs of Dover at the Duke of York's Royal Military School. The ships in the Channel and the sound of the horns a constant reminder of the perils of the sea. You who are gathered here today, and have done so for three decades, know the dangers of the sea. Not only were your lives shipwrecked on 6th March 1987 by the worst peacetime Maritime disaster since the Titanic but for thirty years you have lived with the loss of those you loved and love to this day.

Although there is a fellowship amongst you – a friendship forged through a grief shared – and one that sustains you on days like this – there is also a loneliness to a grief like yours. The sorrow following a major tragedy is unique among griefs.

A public disaster gains huge media attention which is a mixed blessing. Yes, it can help in the pursuit of truth and accountability but the downside is that it makes the survivors and the families like celebrities just at the moment when your soul most needs privacy. On the one hand, you want the world to know what a terrible pain has pierced your heart; on the other hand, you want people to go away to leave you in peace, to mourn, to ache and to be angry that what might have been will never be for the one you love.

And what people fail to realise is that certain words and images freeze your inner being with a stress that triggers all the emotions of the original trauma.

The loneliness of grief after a major disaster can often be accentuated by the fact that the general public moves on, thinking that they know what happened, believing that all the questions have been answered and not really understanding why the families and survivors are still possessed by a passion to remember and to never forget. That can make them feel all the more at odds with the rest of society. And no more so than when they hear some say implicitly or explicitly, 'Why can't you let go? Draw a line? Move on? Find closure?'

There's no such thing as 'closure', nor should there be, for love. The re-living and the remembrance, the quest and the questioning keep alive the love for the one who has died and give expression to their worth.

So, here today in this service you are keeping your love alive. Prayers, spoken and silent, petals soon to be strewn on the water, all done in the name of love and for the love of a name that will be written on your heart for eternity.

On the night of the disaster when 193 of your loved ones were 'unlawfully killed' there were many acts of extraordinary courage and heroism. The day after on television I saw a crew member being interviewed. His shift had been changed at the last moment and he escaped the tragedy. He said by way of explanation of his good fortune, "I guess God was on my side!". Although I could understand his relief I doubted his understanding of God.

The faith that built this church, named after Mary the Mother of Jesus, believes that God was not a distant spectator of the suffering but was lying alongside those who were dying.

The name 'Mary' comes from the word 'bitter' and Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew the bitterness of burying her own child in the same way that you too know the bitterness of burying the ones you love.

There's a famous painting of the Crucifixion by Van Der Veulen called the Descent from the Cross. In it the contours of the body of the mourning mother of Jesus mirror exactly the bent body of her son as he is taken down from the cross to be buried. The parallel shape of the contours show how Mary feels intimately and exactly for and with her beloved child.

But the bent body of Jesus tells us another story. It tells us how much the Son of God aches so symmetrically with the bitter bereavement of his own mother and of all bereaved parents and indeed of all who grieve and mourn their aching loss today.

The God in whom we take refuge for comfort and consolation is the one who became one of us 'from the womb to the tomb'. God himself a person 'of sorrows' and 'acquainted with grief'. He is the God of tears who weeps with us in our weeping. Bent double in grief he holds us and bids us look beyond the horizon of the dangerous sea to another shore where dying and crying, grieving and mourning will become things of the past.

Love lives forever and holds in its strong arms you and all whom you love for all eternity. Amen.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

Bishop of Liverpool 1998 – 2013

Chair of the Hillsborough Independent Panel 2010 - 2012

Knighted in the New Year's Honours List 2017 'for services to bereaved families and to justice'.

